

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 May 2003

May Day round up

Brazil: 1.2 million march in Sao Paulo

The world's largest May Day demonstration took place in Sao Paulo's Campo de Bagatelle Square, as more than a million workers marched to oppose the pension reform proposed by Brazilian President Luis Inacio da Silva, known as Lula. The commemoration took place in the wake of week-long strikes by General Motors and Renault workers. Forca Sindical (FS)—one of Brazil's labor federations—organized the event.

FS leader Paulo Pereira da Silva—Paulinho—said, "We will defend reforms that force the rich to pay taxes, instead of the poor, but we will strike against reforms that harm workers' interests." Also speaking at the event were representatives of Belgian and Italian trade unions as well as local politicians.

Last week, the Brazilian government broke with the tradition that decrees significant minimum wage increases on May Day. President Lula a former trade union leader who heads a cabinet largely composed of trade union officials, declined to participate in the festivities. He went to mass instead.

Argentina: Airline unions march in support of airline employees

Five unions representing airline employees, supported by contingents from the Confederation of Argentine Workers (CTA) and other unions, rallied on May 1 at the Aeroparque airport in Buenos Aires. The protest was in solidarity with the 847 employees facing the loss of their jobs due to the shutdown of one of Argentina's major domestic carriers, LAPA.

The workers are demanding that LAPA not be allowed to cease operations. "This is the first May Day in which I am not working," said a LAPA pilot. "If LAPA shuts down I will have to leave the country for work." Some of the LAPA pilots who were laid off last year are working in Indonesia and Africa.

LAPA workers have set up a tent inside the airport where they maintain a vigil to protest LAPA's closure.

Puerto Rico: Public employees demand decent wages

Puerto Rican unions commemorated the international workers' day by demanding the government carry out its contractual wage agreements with public employees, represented by the United Public Servants union (SPU). SPU represents 12,000 public employees employed in family services and education. The protests also gave a resounding no to the planned privatization of public utilities.

Puerto Rico's governor, Silas Maria Calderon, claims the island colony has no money for raises and has postponed this year's raises for 60,000 workers until January 2004.

In addition to fighting for their wages, the unions also joined in a celebration over the US Navy's return of the bombing range in Vieques Island to Puerto Rican control. Speakers also denounced the US war against Iraq.

Honduras: Workers oppose Iraq war

More than 40,000 workers marched in eight cities in Honduras on May Day, protesting the government's economic policies. They also burned symbols of the United States and the country's president Ricardo Maduro. Honduras' trade unions were established in 1954 as a result of a bitter three-month strike of banana workers against the US-based Chiquita Brands and Standard Fruit Corporation.

Colombia: Thousands demand better living conditions

In Bogota on May Day 10,000 demonstrators protested the increasing impoverishment of Colombian workers and rejected the Alvaro Uribe government's plans for labor "reform."

The United Workers' Central (CUT), Colombia's largest labor federation, opposes the reform that would give employers greater flexibility in hiring and firing, rejecting the claim that this would lower unemployment.

Ten thousand workers also marched in Medellin, Colombia's second largest city. Workers there burned US flags to protest the invasion of Iraq and denounced Uribe's economic policies.

In the Barrancabermeja, center of the oil industry, 4,000 workers marched from the Ecopetrol refinery to the oil workers union headquarters. The workers demanded the government stay out of the current contract negotiations.

Union membership is at a low point in Colombia. By some estimates only 4 percent of workers are union members, down from 15 percent twenty years ago. Paramilitary death squads have assassinated more than 1,000 union leaders in the last decade, including 9 in the last three months and 114 in 2002.

Mexico: 80,000 march in Mexico City

Demanding decent salaries and jobs and protesting draft labor legislation harmful to the labor movement, tens of thousands of workers rallied at Mexico City's Constitution Square on May Day. The march included the firemen's union, on strike for more than a week. The National Workers Union (UNT) and the Mexican Trade Union Front (FSM) organized the main contingents.

Columns of workers marched from several points in the capital city. At the rally speakers denounced President Vicente Fox's free market policies that are causing an increase in poverty.

Over 81 million are unemployed in South America

More than 81 million are unemployed in South America, according to recent government statistics. Sixty one million others are under-employed. Those who have full time jobs earn an average of US\$120 each month.

According to those statistics the countries with the largest rates of unemployment are: Argentina, (21.5%), Venezuela (20.7%), Uruguay (17.8%), Bolivia and Brazil (11.6%).

Those nations with the highest levels of underemployment are Bolivia (65%), Venezuela and Ecuador (55%), Brazil (50%), Peru (40%), Colombia (28.3%) and Argentina (18.6%).

Brazilian autoworkers end strikes against General Motors and Renault

Workers at the Sao Jose dos Campos General Motors Assembly in Sao Paulo returned to work on April 29 after a six-day strike over wages. Workers returned to work though no settlement has been reached. GM management rejected union demands for an automatic "trigger" to increase wages whenever inflation exceeds 3 percent. The union is now proposing a one-time bonus of R900 (US\$300) plus an immediate 10 percent wage increase. Brazilian inflation is forcing down workers' purchasing power.

At the Renault plant in Curitiba workers returned to work on April 28 after a weeklong strike. Workers accepted a one-time bonus of R500 and a

cost of living increase in September of up to R2000 (US\$660), depending on the index.

Brazilian bulldozer operator refuses to destroy a poor family's home

Hamilton dos Santos caught the attention of millions of prime time TV viewers on May 2 when he refused to destroy a house being used by poor families. He was sent to jail for refusing a court order. The operator's action was filmed by newsmen of the Globo network and transmitted throughout Brazil.

Hamilton's employer had been contracted to demolish the house as part of an eviction of squatters in a poor region of Brazil in the neighborhood of Salvador de Bahia.

TV viewers witnessed how Hamilton, in tears, refused the order despite threats to be fired and jailed by his employers and the police. Beseched by the families he was to help evict, Hamilton, whose family of five is also poor, suffered a nervous breakdown. He was sent to the hospital for medications and then sent to jail.

Given the circumstances, Hamilton's boss decided not to fire him after all and later bailed him out. "My conscience is clear," said Hamilton. "Had I destroyed that house, I would not have been able to rest in peace."

New York City: thousands protest planned layoffs

Approximately 15,000 city workers protested at City Hall on April 29 against Mayor Bloomberg's planned budget cuts. The mayor is threatening to immediately lay off over 4,500 municipal workers to help close a nearly \$4 billion budget deficit. These job cuts would add to an already large pool of unemployed workers in the city. According to a recent State Department of Labor study, 223,000 workers have lost their jobs in New York City in the last two years.

The mayor has been demanding unions agree to \$600 million in various concessions such as longer working shifts, the consolidation of health plans and reduced pensions for city workers, in order to reduce the number of layoffs. The job cuts are a result of the planned elimination of billions of dollars in social services that would include firehouse closings, less frequent garbage collection, ending certain after-school activities and reducing aid to senior citizens, foster-care programs and shelters for the homeless.

A wide variety of city employees attended the rally, including teachers, sanitation workers and clerical workers. Workers carried signs such as "Don't balance the budget on our backs," demanding that instead of laying off municipal workers both the mayor and governor should tax the rich. However, there was a huge gulf between the anger and militancy of the rank and file and the corrupt union leaders who are opposed to taking forward any kind of genuine struggle for jobs and social services.

Both speakers at the rally—Dennis Rivera, president of the healthcare workers union, and Randi Weingarten, president of the teachers union—supported the reelection campaign of Governor Pataki, a Republican politician who is adamantly opposed to any kind of taxes on the wealthy. Another keynote speaker was Lillian Roberts, the president of AFSCME District Council 37, the biggest municipal workers union, with 125,000 members. Roberts, who became president 17 months ago promising to end the rampant corruption of the old leadership of that union, has herself recently been caught engaging in corrupt financial practices.

New York State education workers rally against cuts

Teachers, paraprofessionals, and some parents from all over New York State traveled by bus to Albany, the state capital, on May 3, to protest to the state legislature against education cuts. While the demonstrators were energetic in their protests, the rally chiefly provided a platform for state legislators and union leaders promoting the passage of the budget bill agreed upon only the day before.

Governor George Pataki proposed slashing \$1.7 billion from educational funding to lower the state's \$11.5 billion budget deficit. Pataki has

refused to raise income taxes that have been reduced over the years, especially for those in higher tax brackets and big business. Fearing a backlash over the budget cuts from voters, Republican Party state legislators have joined with Democrats to propose a small income tax surcharge and sales tax increase that would impact lower income families more. The regressive taxes would restore about \$2 billion dollars, about half of what the Governor proposed to cut overall. About \$700 billion in cuts to education would still remain of the \$1.24 billion Pataki proposed, on top of \$400 million in cuts previously made.

The speakers from the platform continuously congratulated each other on having Democrats and Republicans "put aside their differences on the budget bill." They repeatedly led the crowd in a chant of "sign the bill!"

The demonstration was clearly organized to strengthen the alliance of the union officials with the twin parties of big business and the banks. Republican Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno posed as a defender of education despite having backed the governor's previous budget cuts.

Two teachers from Utica told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were sure the cuts would raise class sizes, which would especially impact special education students. "They deserve the same as Pataki's kids. They raise the standards for education but do not supply the resources we need. How can we raise standards when we get only \$50 a year for basic supplies like paper and pens and the rest has to come out of our pockets. We are here partly for job security but more the children's education."

Delta Airlines demands pilot concessions

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) has agreed to discuss Delta Airlines management's demand for a 22 percent reduction in hourly pay for the carrier's 9,500 pilots. Delta's proposal also calls for the abandonment of wage increases set to be implemented in both 2003 and 2004. The company had previously announced it would lay off some 200 pilots by the end of May.

Delta's first quarter losses totaled \$466 million. A JP Morgan analyst indicated that the wages for Delta pilots needed to decline by 31 percent in order to be in line with those at United Airlines.

Machinists provide last concessions to bail out bankrupt United Airlines

The International Association of Machinists pushed through 13 percent pay cuts in a concessions package geared to save bankrupt United Airlines \$794 million annually over the next six years. "Our members are providing United Airlines with the means and opportunity to successfully restructure and avoid liquidation," declared IAM official Scotty Ford, who represents the mechanics.

The machinists, ground and customer service workers who comprise the IAM at United were the last group of workers to agree to the cost-cutting demanded under a bankruptcy court restructuring of the company that will drain an overall total of \$2.56 billion per year from all UAL worker groups. IAM District 141-M, representing mechanics, passed the pact by a 70 percent margin, while the proposal received an 83.2 percent yes vote by ground workers in District 141.

Earlier last week flight attendants agreed by a 63 percent margin to nine percent pay cuts. The new contracts will be submitted to the bankruptcy judge in Chicago for approval this week.

Portland ambulance drivers poised to strike

Portland area ambulance workers voted down consecutive contract offers by margins of 326-19 and 336-5, paving the way for a strike when the contract between the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and AMR, a subsidiary of Canada-based Laidlaw, runs out on May 18. The ATU leadership has declined to set a strike date. "If they're willing to get back to the table, we'd sure like to get back to the table," said Local 757 President Al Zullo.

Workers initially rebuffed an AMR proposal that, while offering a 23 percent wage increase, sought to force workers to cover 25 percent of their health and dental insurance premiums by the third year of the contract.

The deal also included new \$10 to \$20 co-payments for doctor's visits. Previously, ambulance drivers paid very low premiums or none at all. A second proposal by AMR, equally detested by workers, attempted to impose the 25 percent share of health premiums on only new employees but lowered the wage increase to only 15 percent. A fully certified paramedic starts out at \$28,300 per year, inadequate in the Portland area where the cost-of-living is substantial.

Calgary Transit workers reject deal

Public transportation workers in Calgary voted by a 65 percent margin against a tentative deal with the city last week. The rejected deal, negotiated between Local 583 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which represents 2,700 workers, and city management, included wage increases of slightly more than three percent in each year of the next three years.

The transit workers, who went on strike in early 2001, have been without a contract since March. Despite the workers' dissatisfaction with the tentative deal, union leader Dean McKerness has indicated the union is not threatening strike action.

Saskatoon Credit Union workers to strike

One hundred and fifty bank workers served a strike notice to the Saskatoon Credit Union. The workers have been without a contract since December 31 and are represented by Local 1400 of the United Food and Commercial Workers. Their main demands are for three years of pay raises, ranging from seven percent a year for the lowest paid workers, to 4.85% for the highest paid workers.

The employer's most recent offer was only for 2.75%, 3% and 3%. The credit union has threatened to hire scab labor in case of a strike or lockout.



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